



Decoding a Historic Map

by Catharine Dann Roeber

Early maps of America have long been of interest to collectors for their beauty, historic significance, and information they provide. Clues to understanding their history and provenance can often be found by examining their content and related documentation. Recently, the provenance of one map at Winterthur emerged as the result of additional research and attention to details hidden in plain sight on the map.

The *Map of the Improved Part of the Province of Pennsylvania in America* (first

printed in 1687) is a large and attractive map considered by some as the “most detailed and impressive for any English colony” produced in the late seventeenth century (Fig. 1).¹ William Penn (1644–1718) supported the production of the cartographic work as a promotional tool to promote his new province. An advertisement in the *London Gazette* in January of 1687/88 reported the map as “...being three Counties, viz, Bucks, Philadelphia, and Chester.” Mainly directed at an English and European audience of potential investors

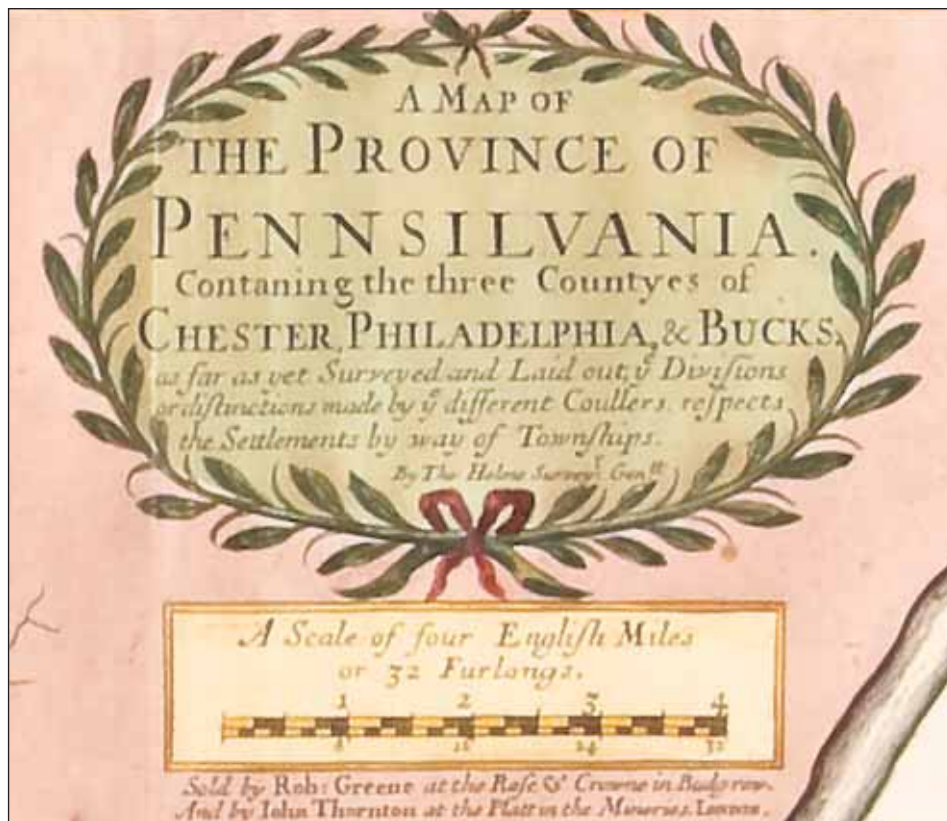
Fig. 1: Thomas Holme, surveyor, *Map of the Improved Part of the Province of Pennsylvania in America*, circa 1701–1705 (first printed 1687). Engraving: 32 ½ x 55 inches (to border). Courtesy of Winterthur Museum & Country Estate, (1963.0853).

RIGHT:

Fig. 2: Detail of scale and wreath.

BELOW:

Fig. 3: Detail of Royal Prussian Academy stamp. There are six stamps (engraved on paper) applied to the surface of the map (one on each sheet forming the map). Courtesy of Winterthur Museum & Country Estate, (1963.0853).



and purchasers, the map provided a hopeful projection of orderly and equitable division of land in Pennsylvania.


Penn's surveyor, Thomas Holme (1624–1695), is often credited with creating the map, yet inscriptions on the map hint at the broader network of surveyors, engravers, printers, and map sellers involved in the production and distribution of such a large and detailed printed work (Fig. 2) While the draft was created in Pennsylvania, the map was sent to London for printing and for sale. The first printing of 1687 was later reproduced in both the original size and in a smaller, slightly modified version. By matching the dates of land purchases to the names depicted in the map, a previous scholar established Winterthur's map as dating to the first decade of the eighteenth century.² Although researchers paid great attention to dating the map, no scholarship existed on the six small paper stamps affixed to the map's surface.

Each of the stamps applied to the map bear images of a crown, a crossed scepter and sword, cornucopias with flowers and fruit, and a banner with a German inscription

(Fig. 3). After sharing the image with map historians, it was determined that the marks are stamps dating to the mid-eighteenth century when Frederick II (1712–1786), a great supporter of the Royal Prussian Academy, required a duty to be paid on any foreign maps imported into Prussia. This duty helped to both promote the local production of maps and regulate the quality of geographic information in circulation. Although the specific owner is unknown, the map can definitely be traced to Germany during a period of vibrant interest in Enlightenment pursuits such as geography, science, and the study of foreign lands.

How, then, did the map end up in Delaware? A paper trail beginning at Winterthur revealed that the map remained in Germany until 1928, when Karl U. Hiersemann, a leading European bookseller, sold the map to A.S.W. Rosenbach, the esteemed Philadelphia doctor and dealer in rare books, during a transaction in Berlin. Rosenbach shipped the map to the United States and offered it to du Pont, creator of Winterthur Museum, who pur-

chased it in 1930.

While details of map ownership are often lost, collectors should make every attempt to establish provenance for their purchases. The prosecution of map thieves in recent years and recovery of stolen maps that made their way onto the market should serve as a caution to acquire valuable maps only from well-respected dealers or auction houses. Researching provenance can not only lead to sound investments but also to a treasure trove of information about maps of early America and their owners. For a source of information on map-related events, map collecting and updated information on map thefts, visit www.maphistory.info. 

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1. Margaret Beck Pritchard and Henry G. Taliaferro. *Degrees of Latitude: Mapping Colonial America*. (Williamsburg, Va: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, in association with H. N. Abrams, 2002), 367.
2. Walter Klinefelter, "Surveyor General Thomas Holme's 'Map of the Improved Part of the Province of Penssylvania'" *Winterthur Portfolio*, 6 (1970): 41–74.